MUSCLE SHOALS MUSIC NOW

SOUNDS AROUND TOWN

The Shoals constantly provides a rich, diverse, and satisfying array of live music events every week. From legendary songwriters and Grammy-winning artists to established as well as emerging artists, and singer-songwriters, the Shoals is bursting with music. Locals and visitors are spoiled for choice for live music across multiple genres from jazz and blues to southern rock and Americana, to folk and hip hop.

The last few months have been packed with some great events, the first of which was the **WC Handy Festival**, which honoured a legend in music with an amazing lineup of music events. The WC Handy Festival is a ten-day long series of music events that occur throughout the Shoals. The Handy Festival is a highlight in the annual calendar, drawing thousands of visitors to the Shoals. Named after William Christopher Handy (1873-1958), a Florence, Alabama, native, the Festival honours the legacy of the man who became known as 'Father of the Blues'. Handy was the first to codify Blues music, translating it into written form, and he is also considered one of the most influential songwriters and composers in America, and he wrote 'St. Louis Blues' among many other well-known Blues songs.

The first WC Handy Festival was held in 1982, initiated by the Music Preservation Society along with American jazz musician, Yale music professor and Shoals native, Willie Ruff. Since 1982, the Handy Festival has grown and now features an impressive array of locations in the Shoals including cafes, restaurants, parks, block parties, street parties, and retail stores, as well as libraries and museums across the four towns that makeup the Shoals: Florence, Sheffield, Tuscumbia and Muscle Shoals.

Of the artists who played at Handy Festival 2024, many were crowd favourites who have developed a strong following and who perform at the Festival year after year. In addition, a large cohort of younger artists feature in many of the key events of the Festival. Songwriters in particular are celebrated during the Festival and there are several songwriter events held during Handy Festival including the prestigious Shoals Songwriter Showcase. This featured seven showcase sessions with songwriting luminaries Phillip White, James LeBlanc, Earl 'Peanutt' Montgomery, Mark Narmore, and Billy Lawson plus local artist-songwriters Gary Nichols, Billy Droze, Dylan LeBlanc, Lucie Tiger, and Angela Hacker.

One of the highlights of the annual Handy Festival, the Kick Off Block Party, is always a crowd-pleasing event. The main street of Florence is closed off for the party and the event attracts an audience of well over a thousand people. Australian Lucie Tiger + Band - featuring Jimbo Hart (ex-Jason Isbell and the 400 Unit), Randy O'Dell (Elvie Shane) plus Desmond Smith and Justin Holder) had the distinct honour of co-headlining this year's Kick Off Party, along with Rollin' In The Hay featuring Donna Hall. The event was such a hit that it was featured on the front page of the local Times Daily.

The wide range of live music in the Shoals is refreshing and a regular and very popular event is the Jazz Masters Series hosted by Ed Bisquera. A pianist, composer, arranger and music producer, Bisquera divides his time between Hilo, Hawaii, and the Shoals. While he's in the Shoals, Bisquera's Jazz Masters Series draws an enthusiastic crowd primarily due to the repertoire carefully devised by Bisquera and the guest musicians he invites to play. Recent artists include Marcus Pope (percussion), Aaron Stapler (guitar), David Ray (acoustic and electric bass) and previously, Ken Watters (trumpet and flugelhorn), Jimmy Sullivan (acoustic and electric bass), Tom Hurst (drums) and Josh Couts (guitar). Bisquera was recently a co-headline act at the Tyrrhenian Jazz festival in Italy and the Shoals is lucky to have an artist of his calibre hosting jazz live music events.

Another regular highlight is the **'Muscle Shoals Meets'** concert series. Held annually, this series was initiated by Russell Mefford and his band The Fiddleworms, and it's now become an impressive concert production held at the Shoals Theatre to a maximum capacity audience. The concert series is such a hit that it raises thousands of dollars and proceeds are always donated to charity, thanks to the involvement of generous sponsors.

"Two different charities approached me about ten years ago and wanted to hire my band to raise money for their charities," Mefford said. He didn't want the charities to spend any of their money on the concert, but Medford knew he had to ensure the artists were paid. Over time and with careful planning and collaborating with local businesses, Mefford perfected the concert series' fundraising model, selling out shows year after year.

In 2024, the concert theme was 'Muscle Shoals Meets The 80s' and the lineup featured an impressive array of Shoals-based artists and musicians including Grammy-winners Gary Baker, Gary Nichols, Jimbo Hart, Jimmy Nutt, Barry Billings, plus Angela Hacker, Connor, Cadence Baker, Lucie Tiger, and Halley Phillips. The finale brought the house down with a fabulous rendition of Fleetwood Mac's 'Tusk' complete with marching bands filling the aisles of the theatre.

The proceeds from this year's concerts were used to build two special needs playgrounds at local high schools - which were completed just a month after the shows - and it was such a popular concert that an additional concert is being held in Decatur. A key element of the concert series is the poster artwork by Scott Campbell, which is always spectacular and expertly translated into an even more spectacular stage set. The music, talent, and vibe both front of house and backstage at these concerts is remarkable and reinforces the local legend that there's something in the water in the Shoals.